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The Money Thrower

There he goes again.

After three terrorist bombings of American installations in Lebanon, after repeated charges of ineptness and negligence and after being urged by even many of his own supporters to discipline or fire somebody, President Reagan has finally done something. He's blamed Jimmy Carter.

There are a lot things that could be said about Reagan's charge that intelligence lapses that allegedly contributed to the recent bombing in Beirut were the fault of previous administrations, presumably Carter's. Mondale said it was passing the buck. Intelligence specialists said it was just not true. Carter himself said it was an insult, demanded an apology and got an "explanation."

The fact is that Reagan's remark was all of those things—and something else as well. It exhibited the central Reagan paradox, which is that when it comes to both national defense and national security, money solves all problems. When it comes to almost anything else, though, particularly welfare programs, money is a diversion, a sop, a way of not thinking. You throw money at social problems; you fund the Defense Department.

When it comes to the Beirut bombing, for instance, the essence of the Reagan remark is that given enough money to hire enough spies two Americans would not now be dead. But the assumption that a small, shadowy group of religious fanatics could be infiltrated is dubious at best. And anyway, lack of spies does not explain why a security gate was left lying on the ground and not installed. You don't have to be licensed to kill to put up a gate.

Ironically, Reagan would be the first to point out the limitations of money when it comes to other programs. He's often accused the Democrats of throwing money at social problems— and sometimes with justification. Moreover, he fastened on the occasional glitch to make it seem typical.

Take welfare, for example. Reagan has consistently denounced fraud and mismanagement in all sorts of welfare programs, never for a moment conceding that both are inevitable when billions of dollars are being spent on millions of people. To him, the exception is the rule.

When it comes to national security, though, the exception remains the exception. Both he and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger cringe at reports that the Pentagon has paid $92 for screws, $435 for hammers and $7,600 for coffee makers. These examples, they both maintain, are the exception, and they are willing to forgive the Pentagon what they would never be willing to forgive the Department of Health and Human Services.

It's obvious, of course, that the issue is not money, it's ideology. To the president, national security is something that can be bought, and it's worth anything it costs. On the other hand, welfare programs are not worth anything at all. He is enamored of power, revolted by dependency and money is just one way of expressing those sentiments. No amount of money, though, can bring order out of the chaos that's Lebanon or stability to a notoriously unstable part of the world.

But money, at least the spending of it, can have a placebo effect. Spending money can be a way of not thinking. In the case of the Beirut bombings, for instance, the president ignores the fact that two of them were predicted by intelligence agencies and indeed the last was publicly threated by the organization that claims to have carried it out. You don't need a spy to read the papers. You don't need to be a national security expert to conclude that someone in Beirut simply forgot to shut the door. And you don't have to be an Einstein to figure that three exceptions in one place looks a lot like the rule.

No matter. After each bombing the president has exonerated the negligent, gone moony in the presence of the military and turned victims into heroes through the magic of the teleprompter. Lack of money is not the issue. The willingness to question basic assumptions is. When it comes to national security, the president wants every buck but the one Harry Truman made famous. It's the one that stops in the Oval Office.